

Brief Communication:

## Liberian Chimpanzees Abandoned by New York Blood Center

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### Background

In the early 1970s, the New York Blood Center (NYBC) established a chimpanzee laboratory in the West African country of Liberia. NYBC built their inventory of study subjects with chimpanzees captured from the wild in Liberia or purchased from people keeping them as pets. In the early 1980s, the establishment of an onsite breeding facility added hundreds more to the population. The chimpanzees were used as human models in invasive biomedical research focused on a variety of diseases, primarily hepatitis. It is estimated that approximately 400 chimpanzees died over the course of NYBC's operation.

NYBC's research at the facility gradually decreased over the years and, in 2006, the program was ended. The remaining chimpanzees were transferred from the laboratory to six mangrove islands located on nearby estuarine rivers, leaving them with little to no natural sources of food or water. Though the islands provide a more spacious and natural home than the laboratory cages, the chimpanzees are still completely reliant on humans for their survival (Figure 1). For approximately ten years, NYBC provided \$30,000 per month to care for the chimpanzees, delivering food and water by boat to the islands at irregular intervals.

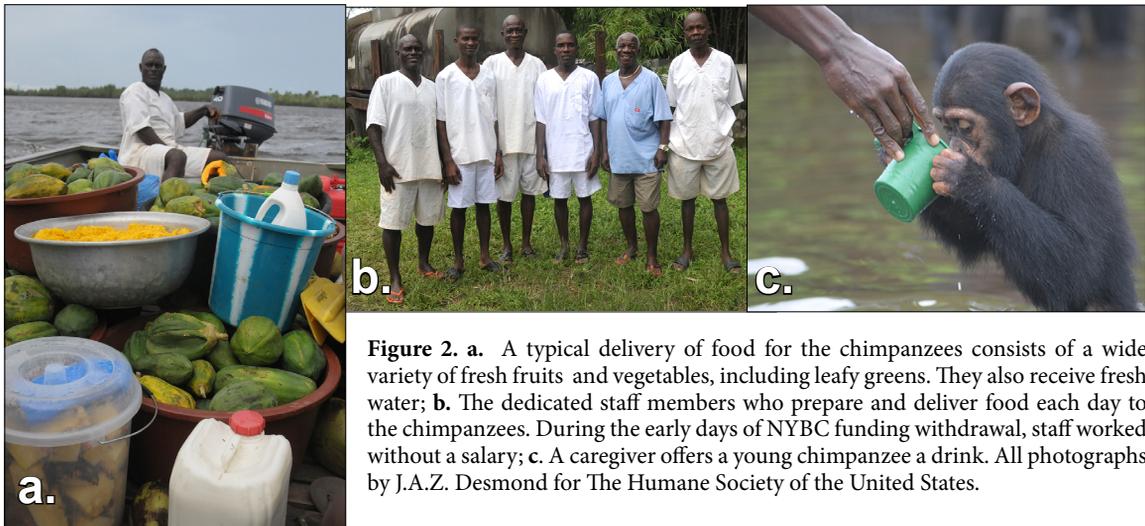


**Figure 1. a.** During times of irregular feeding, the anxious chimpanzees met the boats delivering food with screams; **b.** In sharp contrast, the chimpanzees' demeanor is very different after the feeding schedule became reliable and on a daily basis. Now, they wait patiently for the boat; **c.** A mother shares food with her offspring.



### New York Blood Center Withdraws Support and Refuses Responsibility

In March 2015, NYBC halted all financial support, despite the fact that many individuals within the organization had promised lifetime care for the remaining 66 chimpanzees. Withdrawal of funds left the chimpanzees in a life threatening situation. All caregiver staff were immediately unemployed and, thus, delivery of



**Figure 2.** a. A typical delivery of food for the chimpanzees consists of a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, including leafy greens. They also receive fresh water; b. The dedicated staff members who prepare and deliver food each day to the chimpanzees. During the early days of NYBC funding withdrawal, staff worked without a salary; c. A caregiver offers a young chimpanzee a drink. All photographs by J.A.Z. Desmond for The Humane Society of the United States.

food to the islands was reduced to volunteers who collected food on their own. Moreover, during that time, the islands' fresh water systems were broken, leaving the chimpanzees with no fresh water, except that brought to them by the volunteers.

As a large nonprofit blood services organization based in New York City, with approximately \$475 million in assets and annual revenues of more than \$300 million, NYBC is fully capable of continuing to provide lifetime support for the chimpanzees they used for over thirty years in their research. In withdrawing their support, New York Blood Center has left the full financial burden of care on animal protection organizations and the government of Liberia.

### Formation of a Coalition

The former NYBC research chimpanzees are alive today only because dedicated caregivers voluntarily continued feeding them and brought international awareness to their dire situation (Figure 2). Once alerted to the emergency faced by the chimpanzees and former NYBC staff, The Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International stepped in to provide for their immediate care by establishing Liberia Chimpanzee Rescue. They also began building a coalition of over 35 organizations focused on raising additional support and awareness about the situation, while encouraging NYBC to resume their responsibility to the chimpanzees.

Prior to public awareness of the chimpanzees' abandonment, The Humane Society of the United States made multiple attempts to contact New York Blood Center, urging the organization to renew its funding for the chimpanzees and to discuss the potential for a long term solution, which would

include a decrease in the support required. Despite a large public outcry from more than 200,000 individuals and widespread media coverage demanding they accept responsibility for the chimpanzees, NYBC has refused to engage in direct communication and have made clear their position through public statements on their website.

### Working Toward a Better Future for the Chimpanzees

Thanks to the generosity of thousands of people around the world, The HSUS-led coalition has raised funds to help improve life for the chimpanzees abandoned by New York Blood Center in Liberia. Water systems have been repaired, the chimpanzees are being fed a nutritious and diverse diet every day, additional birth control measures have been implemented, and a full time team has been put in place to ensure proper care and management.

Liberia Chimpanzee Rescue has the ultimate goal of providing true sanctuary for the former research chimpanzees with care that meets the highest standards, such as those established by the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance. The development of in-country solutions will not only provide proper care for the chimpanzees but also social, economic and environmental benefits for the surrounding communities.

A commitment from New York Blood Center to resume their financial responsibility combined with a clear plan developed and implemented by experienced and reputable local and international animal welfare and conservation partners will ensure a positive long term outcome for all involved.

For more information and to learn how you can help, go to [www.facebook.com/abandonedchimps](http://www.facebook.com/abandonedchimps).